Covert Arms Aid Defended

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Central Intelligence Agency director William E. Colby yesterday defended covert arms shipments in peacetime as an entirely legal activity for the CIA.

Colby made the remarks at a breakfast session with reporters in response to a question about the reported CIA shipment of millions of dollars in Soviet and Chinese weapons several years ago to Kurdish rebels in Iraq.

The CIA director declined to comment on those reports, but defended covert arms shipments in general and described them as the type of activity that the CIA is "still engaged in."

Colby said the practice could be traced all the way back to Banjamin Franklin, who, the CIA director said, operated what might be called a "proprietary" in Paris through which French arms could be shipped here during the American Revolution.

Hurriedly fired this month and then asked by President Ford to stay on the job until current Congressional investigations wane, Colby said he has long recognized that "a new face" would be needed at the CIA when the inquiries are over.

The CIA director acknowledged that he and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had occasionally disagreed over how much to disclose to congressional investigators. But Colby, whom Kissinger apparently considered too open, said he doubted a harder line would have saved his job.

Colby said he turned down President Ford's offer of the NATO ambassadorship primarily because of all the hullaballoo about the CIA. He said he felt this would have invited demonstrations and adverse reactions from people in other countries.